

WHALE POEM

I read this afternoon
a book of poems all about whales.
They were well written poems
and they seemed to be getting at something,
but significance, like beauty,
is largely lost on me.
Furthermore my attention span for symbolic whales
is even shorter than that for the literal variety.

Still, I wondered why I'd never written a whale poem.
I only live a few seconds from the ocean
and every February the whales cruise past
on their way to mate in Baja.
I think that Baja would be a nice place to mate,
especially if you were as big as a whale
and didn't have to worry about federales or banditos.

Anyway, last year I took my kids on a whale-watching
cruise,
but the whole process of spout and parabola
only takes a couple of seconds
and I could barely locate the damned,
protectively colored mammals in that time myself,
let alone get my kids' heads wrenched in the right
direction.

So little matters though: that night my boy
told his mother he'd seen a thousand whales,
just as in the mountains
he never fails to see one million bears.

And when my daughter was in second-grade
she took to reading voraciously
even "adult" books like Gatsby
that I would give her
and which she would skim,
comprehending a lot more than you would think,
although she was no doubt doing it
only to make her old man happy.

So I gave her the unabridged Three Musketeers
and when she made it through that in no time flat
I handed her Moby Dick.
Even I now think that I was probably a little crazy
at that time, in and of the time, of that stage
of my love for my daughter,
but I was also working on a principle
that has guided a part of my teaching:
that once a person has made it through

a Ulysses or The Sound of the Fury
he can be confident with any book that he encounters.

Moby Dick was the last straw though.
She ploughed through it all right,
and she still reads lots of books,
but she won't touch anything I recommend.
I have to pretend I've never heard of the Bröntes
or Jane Austen,
lest they be consigned to that Index
at the head of which sits Queequeg.

Well, what do I know about whales anyway.
Nothing.
My whale poem will have to be imaginative as hell.
Mauve whales, whales that speak French,
whales that personify Satan or Gore Vidal.
The Surrealistic Whale of Salvador Locklin.
Only Fellini will be qualified to make
an art-film of my whale poem.
It will employ discarded footage
from all the films that Gregory Peck has ever made,
because he's always seemed to have a harpoon up his ass.

Both book and film will out-dull Moby Dick.

GORE

I took my kids, one nine, the other six,
to the bullfights yesterday.
They loved them.
They didn't cry or look away or cover their eyes.
They wanted to see everything
and they were especially pleased
that there was more going on
than at the baseball game we'd attended the night before.

In the car on the way
I'd given them a little Death-in-the-Afternoon précis,
so they wouldn't make the mistake of seeing it
as man against bull.
It didn't take them many bulls to realize
how difficult it is to bring it all off right,
what with the variables of wind and sun
and the jumping and hooking of the bull
and the impatience of the crowd.
Not a single ear was cut all day --
atrocious killing spoiled a couple of outstanding faenas.